

One of the neighbors on the Divide asked the other day after a meeting whether he could run kid goats on his pastures on the Divide. Wanted to know whether the coyotes and bobcats prowled too thick to substitute goats where he'd stocked 1100-pound Brangus mother cows before the weather failed.

The question was directed to the floor. Smooth cheeks learn not to give graybeards a chance to expound one on one, unless they are looking for a timely tip on how to grease a buggy axle, or, say, string a banjo.

He further asked in rapid fire whether trappers paid off, how effective predator control was if you found a good trapper, and did people still use hounds to run wolves and cats?

Those were hard questions to answer due to the variation in operators and the terrain. On the old ranch, the big draws and cedar canyons on the east side seemed to draw predators. Up on the Divide on the open mesas, the pestilence appeared more likely to pass through if confronted. Over on the place north of Mertzon, the west side joined the Lopez Spring's cedar brakes. Bobcats denned on Lopez to restore their furs and sharpen their fangs. Had

I kept running goats or woolies there, for example, I'd have had to apply for a job running the county road grader to pay the taxes.

"Sheep, he said later, "are too high to buy." He said he read on the Internet market where a set of ewes were offered north of Angelo for \$335 a head. Ages were undisclosed, however, sheep don't age on country; drouth and coyotes make a cull at the same time.

Sharp as those operators are up the North Concho River, they probably have an irrigated field to graze and sheds to shelter their flocks. Those hombres up toward Sterling City and further on north are not a bunch of rinky-dink bitterweed operators like we are over here to the west.

On the way through there to New Mexico, straight fences and painted gates let you know might as well leave your ping-pong bat at home around here. This is the real stuff. A pass by a church house brings back, too, the long-ago wedding when the bride's mother cooked all the cakes and cookies instead of contracting a big splash by an Angelo delicatessen.

Safe bet, also, that she gathered the eggs and churned the butter at the ranch to cook the cakes. God knows how far you'd have had to drive to find another chicken house

or milk shed, much less a sun bonnet or a sack of clothes pens. (Don't be fooled. The only thing in my house not from the grocery store is mistletoe.)

The trapper question caused serious reflection. In all those years fighting predators, the main effort had gone into concealing the tools. My kids delighted to come back to the ranch to help mark lambs or shear. But part of the homecoming was to bring along environmentalists with lap dawgs and house kitties and suitcases full of cosmetics like sunscreens and lip salves.

Trappers never made it often enough on the Divide to be a publicity problem. One old guy hung his catch on the public road to Mertzson. He strung the carcasses on both sides of a gate. Only way to explain why this escaped attention is this that old guy threw so many Budweiser cans in the right of way that the glitter in the roads and pastures must have focused the attention on the litter instead of the deceased dangling in the sunshine off the top wires.

We carried only one gun in a feed wagon. By the time the cowboy put his lunch and his coveralls and jacket in the seat, the rifle qualified for a concealed weapon. My armory was so far back in a closet, a wolf or cat would

have escaped before the coat hangers untangled, unless they already had a foot in a trap.

Around the roundup dinner tables, heartfelt sermons centered on humane protection of the lambs, calves and fawns. Calves we saved in the snows, and orphaned lambs bottled in blizzards pushed aside stories of colts taught to stand to suck a rubber nipple. Now too late to help as always the case, the truth is that more effort has been expended hiding and diverting attention from predator control than controlling predators and catching varmints.

Two hombres who helped a lot of times at the old ranch said they marked a five percent lamb crop in February. If you don't understand, imagine you own a furniture store. You have a sale. After the sale at the tally, you discover all but five percent of the proceeds were stolen. That's what happened to those two herders – ninety five percent of their lamb crop was stolen.